

Responding to a Disaster / The Storms of 2008

The Department of Human Services faced unprecedented challenges in the spring and summer of 2008, first with deadly tornados and then disastrous flooding.

The goal was to preserve service and safety for some 800,000 Iowans—especially those assisted by a major regional DHS office that was washed out of service for weeks. The department also aggressively launched disaster-specific programs. A heavy emphasis going forward is to provide crisis mental health counseling.

Key decisions shaped the DHS response.

One decision was to quickly ramp up capacity from within, enabling rapid deployment of staff to high-need areas without importing untrained workers from other states. DHS workers responded with vigor, volunteering to travel on short notice for three- to five-day shifts at disaster centers. For several weeks, about 120 income maintenance workers—fully 20 percent of the people who do this work statewide—were on the road. Scores of others volunteered to cover for departed colleagues. The result was that the DHS immediately had staff in place to administer disaster food assistance and other programs.

In another critical decision, the DHS advocated for and reached agreement with state and Federal officials to forgo regularly scheduled reapplications for aid programs, particularly food assistance, subsidized childcare, and Medicaid, for people whose annual or semi-annual reviews were scheduled for July or August.

As neighborhood after neighborhood became overwhelmed, disproportionately affecting low-income Iowans, it became clear that “business as usual” regarding reapplications would cause major service disruption for thousands of people whose reviews were scheduled in those months. Some would not even receive letters containing the forms, and many would not have access to documents needed to complete them. Recipients who were spared the review process still must report changes in income or family makeup, and the DHS will act on normal data matches to prevent unqualified people from receiving benefits.

A third decision was to engage Federal officials and aggressively launch disaster-specific programs:

- DHS asked for and received approval from Federal officials to offer disaster food assistance in all 73 counties that received a presidential disaster declaration for individual assistance. More than 35,000 people received this one-time benefit. Eighty percent of those people were new food assistance customers, most of them ineligible for regular benefits. The average household disaster assistance benefit was \$355.
- The DHS applied for and received FEMA grants to supplement local agencies providing crisis mental health counseling. Project Recovery Iowa, launched shortly after the deadly tornados of late May, is expected to continue well into 2009. A toll-free telephone number was established as the entry point for assistance. By late summer, more than 13,000 people had brief personal or telephone contact with counselors, thousands more attended meetings, and more than 25,000 people received educational materials. Nearly 1,700 people received individual counseling.

- The DHS quickly set up a call center to handle the Other Needs Assistance portion of FEMA grants. In presidential disaster-declared counties, flood victims are eligible for Individual and Household Assistance, including housing assistance (administered by FEMA) and ONA administered by the DHS. The total benefit for both programs cannot exceed the FEMA limit of \$28,800. About 7,200 people have received \$14.2 million in ONA assistance.
- The DHS administers an Iowa grant program for low-income families who suffer disaster losses. The program is launched when the governor declares a disaster but it is superseded by far-more-generous Federal grants when the president declares a disaster for individual assistance. In the disaster of 2008, 75 percent of the state received the presidential declaration, leaving only a handful of counties in which the Iowa-only program was applicable.

An enormous logistical problem was created when the DHS regional office in Cedar Rapids, including a major Child Support Recovery Unit hub, was overwhelmed by floodwaters. After extensive cleaning and safety checks, staff returned to the building six weeks later.

In the meantime, thanks to nimble decision-making and quick internal IT work, functions were never lost. Telephone calls reporting child abuse or neglect were immediately rolled over to the Johnson County office, where the child protection intake unit for the 14-county area was initially dispatched. There were no delays in abuse or neglect assessments when intakes were accepted. Other department functions found temporary homes in schools or social service providers, and the county DHS telephone number remained in service throughout.

Director Kevin Concannon postponed his retirement for five weeks to help direct the agency's response. He ordered the fast internal buildup—"Don't wait for the FEMA fire trucks," he said—and he also ordered daily meetings of the department's top-level executives, normally a weekly event.

Communication is critical in times of crisis. Unlike the flood disaster of 1993, the DHS this year had the advantage of ubiquitous cell phone communication, high-speed Internet connections, and laptop computers. A key decision was to obtain and distribute Internet access devices, allowing workers to check histories and make quick decisions when they were sent to places where hard-wired computer access was not available. In addition, a daily bullet-point memo from central office was sent widely to staff, legislators, and others.

In other action:

- Health and safety checks were made for hundreds of vulnerable children in the child welfare system and for seriously emotionally disturbed children in a Medicaid waiver program. All were safe, although some were displaced.
- The Des Moines-based food assistance call center was quickly expanded to handle an avalanche of calls. The center was essential in helping people sort out questions regarding food assistance, grant applications, and many issues with little or no connection to the DHS. On some days, the center processed more than 500 calls, five times the normal rate.
- Beginning in early July, the Independence Mental Health Institute became the temporary home for a flooded-out shelter for women recovering from substance abuse. By late

summer, 13 women and 15 children were living on campus. School-aged kids were enrolled in the local district.

- The DHS determined that people receiving childcare assistance who lost jobs would not lose eligibility. Normally, a low-income person must either have a job or be a full-time student in order to receive this benefit. The exception applied only to people participating in the program prior to the disaster.
- A precautionary evacuation of low-lying offices in Des Moines sent 150 child support workers and targeted case managers into a variety of make-do offices, including 50 who took up residence in the chambers of the Iowa House of Representatives. Despite the disruption, there were no delays in sending child support dollars to custodial parents.

Floodwaters receded by mid summer but, judging by experience in other disasters, stress symptoms will likely surface for many months to come as Iowans struggle to regain their balance. Going forward, one of the department's key goals is to help survivors realize that help is available and to keep watch on their families and neighbors for signs of stress. The department has applied for a \$4.6 million grant to support crisis counseling well into calendar 2009. An estimated 6.5 percent of people receiving crisis counseling will have ongoing needs. To assist community mental health centers to provide these services, the DHS has asked for a Federal appropriation of \$7.7 million

The department has also asked for \$15 million in Federal funds to expand subsidized childcare to families of an estimated 7,100 children in flooded areas, \$2 million to assist licensed childcare facilities to recover from flood damage, \$440,000 to establish a real-time shelter availability database, and \$650,000 for disaster-recovery training.

Throughout the disaster, there were no disruptions of the DHS's many services, including Medicaid, food assistance, child support, child welfare, childcare assistance, childcare regulation, refugee assistance, and child health insurance. The department's nine institutions did not sustain appreciable damage and their operations continued without interruption.

"We haven't done a formal look-back and the final chapter won't be written for months to come, but I'm proud of the decisions we made and the work of our employees to assure seamless delivery of all DHS services under extraordinary circumstances," said Interim Director Sally Titus.